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ABSTRACT

Intended as a resource for student seminars, this guide describes the seminar process and provides suggestions for making seminars more productive. First, the learning objectives of the seminar process are listed, indicating that students should gain the following skills: group interaction, integrative discussion, critical evaluation, and exploring and mining a text. Next, positive outcomes of student seminars are presented: shy or reserved students find voice, students experience diverse views and gain a clearer understanding of texts, and smaller group discussion allows exploration of texts that might not occur in the classroom environment. A general description of seminars is then provided, focusing on basic processes, the responsibilities of the seminar group, and the intellectual activity that seminars provide, and the roles of the teacher and students are described, explaining the teacher's role as an experienced learner and the students' roles as facilitators, observers, or participants. A list of suggestions prepared by seminar participants at Washington's North Seattle Community College for making seminars more productive and comfortable is then provided, emphasizing the importance of being prepared, participating, and maintaining sensitive and polite interpersonal relations. The remainder of the guide describes the use of seminar reflection papers, criteria for assessing seminar observers, seven levels of seminar participation for use in assessing participants, and concerns and drawbacks of the seminar process. (TGI)

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The Student Seminar: A Powerful Tool for In- depth, Critical Discussion

By Sandra Johanson



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Learning Objectives



➔➔ My intention is that students gain the following skills through the process of seminar-ing:

✦ Skills of Group Interaction

✦ Skills of Integrative Discussion

✦ Skills of critical evaluation

✦ Skills of Exploring and Mining a Text

Some Positive Outcomes

- Shy or reserved students find voice.
- Students experience diverse views on a text.
- Discussion helps to clarify students' own views.
- Students gain a clearer understanding of the text.
- Students are highly motivated to research and prepare for discussion.
- Group sharing provides a more in-depth understanding of the material.
- Asking questions and forming opinions for seminar leads students to a discovery of who they are.
- Smaller group discussion allows exploration of texts that might not occur in classroom environment.
- Students are put at ease because seminars put each participant on even ground.



SEMINARS

A GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Every two weeks, we will meet for an hour or so in a seminar setting. What does that mean? The word "seminar" comes from the same root as "semen" or seed. So a seminar is a place where seeds--ideas-- are sown, allowed to germinate, are cultivated and sometimes brought to harvest. The word can be used as a verb, also, denoting the process carries out in a seminar.

Here is what should and can happen in a seminar. A group of interested learners comes together after having read, studied, and thought about readings or films. This solitary preparation is essential. This preparation should include marking the readings for interesting passages, reviewing those important sections and organizing one's thoughts on paper in the form of a seminar paper of about a page. (See handout on Seminar Journal.)

In the seminar, the group is responsible for exploring the texts and the ideas people have brought from reading and thinking about it. It's a time to "mine" the texts, to work it over as a group, to think out loud about it and to test some ideas against the group. For example, the following might be overheard in a seminar: "I don't know if this is valid, but it seems to me that the author is saying..."; or "Here on page 15 the author says (quote); this seems to be his most important point. What I think he is saying is..."; or, "Joe, I like your idea. It really connects with something I was thinking about when the author said..."

A seminar is not an arena for performance to show that you have read the text, nor is it a reporting session to read your papers. It's more than a class discussion, and it is definitely not a time for a lecture from an expert. There are places for these activities in other sessions, but not in seminar.

Seminar is a special time for a unique intellectual activity. It is focused but free-flowing, searching, questioning, going deeper to understand ideas from the text, from others and from within yourself. Sometimes, the group will come to some conclusions, some closure; sometimes it will seem like a series of disconnected discussions, like a popcorn popper with ideas jumping around the table without clear connections. It is a place to discover new ideas and a check-point to test old ideas.

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TEACHER AND STUDENT ROLES

The teacher's role in a seminar is at best that of an experienced learner. He or she is not the focus of attention or the authority who will tell you what the author of the reading meant. It is my intention to take the role of an observer during seminars, unless I feel there is a great need for my intervention. I will intervene if I observe students being rude and/or disrespectful to one another.

For each seminar, one student in the class will agree to act as **facilitator**. (Extra credit will be given to those students who volunteer to act as facilitators.) Prior to each seminar, the class will generate questions for discussion during seminar. The facilitator's job is to organize the discussion around these questions, to keep the conversation on track, to regularly summarize what has been said, to monitor discussion and to wrap up the seminar in the end.

Also for each seminar, three students will act as **observers** during the seminar. (Each student in the class will have an opportunity to take on this role twice during the quarter.) These students' job is to watch the group interaction closely and make observations about these interactions. These students will be asked to report on these observations at the next class session.

The remaining members of the class are the seminar **participants**. Participants must learn to listen actively to each other, and to speak openly to the whole group (not just to the facilitator). The group must learn to be sensitive to the needs of all. The more naturally dominant students must discipline themselves in order to listen, perhaps encourage the less vocal members to share their ideas, and reinforce even hesitant attempts at participation. The naturally quiet people must learn to be more assertive and resolve to share their insights with the group. Those who are "thin-skinned" must learn to manage bluntly stated or argumentative remarks. Those who are quick to jump down anyone's throat must learn to pause and consider their remarks before jumping.

Each person must speak in turn and allow others to finish their thoughts. Interruptions are almost always counterproductive in seminar. Silent periods are OK. Silence gives time to process thoughts, and to try to assimilate and become comfortable with or consider how to respond to what's been said.

The discussion must be focused on the reading at hand. One way to do that is by pointing out a particular section of reading which one wishes to discuss (and perhaps reading it out loud for the benefit of the group). Then one can go on to explain that section of the reading ("what I think the author is saying here is..."). Finally, one can go on to argue with the author or to compare it to another.

Finally, if things are not going well, it's our responsibility, individually and collectively, to put things right. If it seems clear to you that the seminar is not proceeding in a positive or helpful manner, it is perfectly appropriate to voice that opinion and ask the group to resolve whatever problem is keeping the seminar from going well.

SEMINAR PARTICIPATION GUIDE

The following list of suggestions for making seminars productive and comfortable was compiled by students in a North Seattle Community College class. We found the list so helpful, we have reproduced it for your benefit here.

I. PREPARATION

Read material (text or film) fully: highlighting, underlining, commenting in the margins, identifying key words and passages, etc.

Note-taking: identify significant passages in the book (or film), summarizing important ideas after you've read each section, etc. Keep notes together in a journal.

Point to specifics in the text, explain the text, comment on the selections you consider important or insightful.

Formulate specific arguments, insights, problems, questions encountered in the text.

Look for connections with other course readings, lecture ideas, and course theme.

II. PARTICIPATION

Always attend, and be on time.

Contribute your ideas.

Stay focused on the texts (or films), read the passage aloud.

Connect your point to the previous speaker's point.

Listen carefully and actively, eyes on speaker, questioning speaker to fully understand the point.

Allow for quiet time (even several minutes, maybe) for reflection.

Make a difference in the group: i.e. if you weren't there, the seminar would be less interesting.

Venture to ask "stupid" questions -- other people are probably wanting to ask the same one, but have no more courage than you do.

Play the (sensitive) devil's advocate.

Share ideas you are not certain about and ask others to help clarify.

Move eye contact around the group; speak to the whole group, not just to the facilitator.

Be spontaneous and interested in exploring ideas; present arguments against a concept or interpretation presented by another.

Keep focused on one idea for a length of time in order to explore it more thoroughly and make transitions to new ideas.

Use "I" statements.

III. INTERPERSONAL

Reinforce each other's ideas.

Compliment the worth of others' ideas.

Be sensitive and polite.

Be careful with negative, non-verbal signals.

Encourage quiet, timid people.

If you are typically a verbal person, be disciplined and don't talk too much.

Be open to new ideas or ideas you don't agree with.

Sometimes function as the leader of the group.

Use inclusive language.

Help groups to resolve conflict by verbalizing any problem.

IV. THINGS TO AVOID

Talking about books the others have not read.

Not reading or last-minute reading.

Put-downs.

Too much personalizing.

A few people dominating the group.

B.S. with generalizations or extraneous material when you haven't read the material.

Side comments and side conversations.

Interruptions.

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SEMINAR REFLECTION PAPERS

Seminar reflection papers are **one-page, double-spaced, typewritten papers** in which you reflect on **one issue** from the assigned readings or films of the past week or so. Your reflection might take the form of asking and discussing a question that has puzzled you, or of discussing your response to an argument or important point that has troubled or inspired you. On the other hand, you might choose to analyze an argument we have discussed in class. The important point is that these papers are **your** ideas and thoughts on the topics we are discussing in class.

Please do not be concerned about whether you have interpreted a philosopher correctly or whether you are right or wrong in some thought you are expressing. We will not assess your paper on the basis of these criteria. Rather, we will look for a demonstration that you have read the assigned readings carefully, thought about them in some depth, and listened thoughtfully in class. In addition, we will look for a clear, thoughtful, and creative articulation of your ideas. Since correct grammar directly impacts clarity, we will look at and assess your papers for a few elements of grammar.

Seminar papers are due at the beginning of each seminar. (You will quite probably want to have yours in front of you during the seminar so you can be reminded of your thoughts.) **Unless you have told us in advance of your absence or had some emergency which kept you from school, you may not turn in a seminar paper if you are not present at the seminar.**

SUGGESTED FORMAT

FIRST PARAGRAPH: Provide an in-depth explanation of the issue on which you will focus your paper, including the source (or sources) of the issue.

SECOND (THIRD AND FOURTH, IF NECESSARY) PARAGRAPH: Thoroughly discuss what inspires, troubles, or perplexes you about the issue, **or** provide a critical analysis of the issue or the author's view of the issue. Provide examples and illustrations to help explain your ideas.

FINAL PARAGRAPH: Conclude your paper with summary remarks.

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING OBSERVER _____

Field Notes and Observations • keeps track of key ideas • notes group interaction and dynamics • notes levels of participation of both individuals and entire group	Description of Observer's Behavior (1-3)
Reporting • Briefly but clearly and coherently summarizes key ideas discussed in seminar; not merely an itemized list ("We discussed x, then we discussed y, etc.") but a summary of the tensions, oppositions, or conflicts ("We discussed x; some students believed _____ because _____ while others thought _____ because _____") and a statement about how the group reconciled or failed to reconcile opposing views ("Students who believed _____ decided they could agree with students who believed _____ if both sides could compromise on _____"; or "Students who believed _____ and students who believed _____ could not agree because of their fundamental disagreement over _____". • Briefly but clearly and coherently summarizes group seminar behavior and levels of participation, including an assessment of productive and/or non-productive seminar behaviors	Assessment of Observer's Report (1-4)

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SEMINAR SELF-ASSESSMENT

After each seminar, please take a few moments to assess your own participation during the seminar discussion. On the back of this page, you will find space to write your reflections. Please hand these in during the hour following the seminar. These self-assessments will count as a minor part of your seminar grade.

To help you assess your own participation, the following are seven levels of seminar participation. The higher your level of participation. The higher your seminar grade.

LEVEL 1 SILENT

You made no response throughout the entire seminar. Although there are many good reasons for this behavior, silence can nevertheless sabotage a seminar and restrict learning. For this reason, you must consider carefully your reasons for silence and try to find a way to break through these barriers in subsequent seminars.

LEVEL 2 SILENCING THE TEXT

Your personal opinions, experiences, or memories dominated your participation without much consideration to link these with the material being discussed. Complacent or bored, you may have felt unable to engage in the discussion. Further, you may have felt judgmental of the material or dismissed it altogether. None of these feelings is helpful to learning. Consider how you can get beyond these for subsequent seminars.

LEVEL 3 TESTING THE WATER

You made two or three general comments about the material which let people know that you read it. However, these comments were brief, and perhaps superficial -- you were beginning to get your "toes wet." For next time, consider explaining your ideas in more depth and making a conscious effort to link your comments with the material.

LEVEL 4 COLLECTING

You made many observations and provided quotes from the material, but without much analysis. You may still be feeling a bit overpowered by the material, but what is important is that you are persisting and continuing to struggle with it.

LEVEL 5 ENGAGING

At this level, you not only have an intellectual response to the material, but an emotional one as well. You displayed enthusiasm and confidence. You were able to do any number of the following: discuss the position and biases of the authors, seek to make meaning out of quotes, ask questions, answer questions about the material posed by the group, clarify your position and that of others. This signals that you have adopted an effective strategy for learning.

LEVEL 6 UNDERSTANDING

Through your participation, you integrated material with your personal experience (thus illuminating the text rather than silencing it) and with other material from this class as well as from others. You made connections which were meaningful and insightful. Your contributions reflected genuine listening to what other group members have contributed and an effort to integrate your comments with theirs.

LEVEL 7 DISCRIMINATING

Not only did your participation demonstrate understanding as described above, but you exhibited critical appreciation and respect for the material and the contributions of your fellow group members. You made a conscious effort to evaluate the material, and you acknowledged your disagreements with the material or your inability to understand it where appropriate.

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SEMINAR ASSESSMENT

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Seminar 1

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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comments:

Seminar 2

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

comments:

Seminar 3

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

comments:

Seminar 4

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

comments:

Seminar 5

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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comments:

INSTRUCTOR ASSESSMENT

P A

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comments:

P A

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comments:

P A

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comments:

P A

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comments:

P A

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comments:

Expressed Concerns and Drawbacks

- ♥ Students may lack the maturity to interact at this level.
- ♥ Students may lack the fundamental skills of reading and critical evaluation to perform at this level.
- ♥ Student independence in discussion can lead to superficiality, dominating behavior, highly emotional interaction, going off on a tangent, and chaotic discussion.
- ♥ Students who don't understand the material can't perform at the expected level and are penalized.
- ♥ Students who are naturally shy or quiet are disadvantaged.
- ♥ Discussion is not fruitful if students are unprepared.
- ♥ Seminars penalize students who do not learn through expression of their ideas
- ♥ An unprepared or disengaged facilitator can ruin a discussion.
- ♥ Repetition of the practice can lead to boredom with it.
- ♥ Disrespectful students may offend and hurt others.
- ♥ Students feel pressured to perform and participate, and may perform in a superficial way to fulfill the requirement.
- ♥ Students may dominate the text.